Businesses Urged to Consider Their Data Privacy Practices

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MADISON – You double check to make sure you have your wallet, ID and credit cards in your pocket as you leave a store with a new purchase. But do you realize you have already left a chunk of personal data at the register?

For Data Privacy Day (January 28th), the Wisconsin Office of Privacy Protection, part of the Bureau of Consumer Protection in the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP), is asking Wisconsin business to consider the steps they take to secure their customers' personal information.

"With each credit card purchase, online order or swipe of the customer loyalty card, consumers transmit personal information to retailers," said Sandy Chalmers, Division Administrator of Trade and Consumer Protection. "Keeping this data secure is a significant responsibility for Wisconsin businesses."

Identity theft is the nation's fastest growing crime, with more than 11 million people in the United States victimized each year. An estimated one in six people will become an identity theft victim at some point in their lives. With just a small amount of information, an identity thief can destroy a person's financial reputation and launch a costly, frustrating recovery process for the victim. In fact, identity theft costs consumers millions of dollars in fraudulent charges each year, and it can take a consumer years and thousands of dollars to undo the damage.

Businesses are responsible for developing privacy policies and maintaining secure servers that properly protect the identities and personal data of their customers. But recent news of servers breaches at Zappos.com and Sony's Playstation Network and Sony Online Entertainment have resulted in data theft from more than 100 million accounts combined.

A data breach is extremely harmful to a business, both financially for recovery and prevention and also to the company's reputation. Businesses that adopt and implement a privacy plan to address data security protect themselves as well as their consumers.

"In general, Wisconsin businesses do an admirable job of protecting their customer data," said Chalmers. "To provide extra assistance in protecting customers' identities, DATCP's Office of Privacy Protection can guide businesses in developing privacy policies and incident response plans in case of a breach."

The Office of Privacy Protection works with Wisconsin consumers, businesses and law enforcement agencies to educate them on identity theft and fraud protection. It also provides victim assistance to those harmed by identity theft and helps local law enforcement agencies to investigate this crime. To learn more about the Office of Privacy Protection, visit privacy.wi.gov.

For more information or to file a consumer complaint, visit Consumer Protection's website at datcp.wisconsin.gov; send an e-mail to datcphotline@wisconsin.gov or call toll-free at 1-800-422-7128. Consumers can also visit staysafeonline.org to learn about protecting their devices, identifying "spam" emails and "phishing" scams, and scanning their computers for viruses using free online resources.

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